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CIA Director Trips On Newsman-Spies

CIA Director Stansfield Turner ran into some strident protests last week when he mentioned to visiting newspaper editors in Washington that he and the Carter administration were prepared to use American journalists for foreign intelligence or espionage work.

Then-CIA Director George Bush, in the midst of agency oversight investigations in 1974, banned the practice. Adm. Turner said he had approved using American journalists in three instances since 1977 but that later developments aborted the plans. Mr. Turner assured the editors that such requests were made only in "exceptional situations" when no other options were available.

Probably most Americans would regard this as a parochial press issue. Right now, maybe it is. But a reporter-as-spy policy affects readers as well as writers. Uncle Sam's (or Uncle Stan's) use of reporters, no matter how honorable, blurs that distinctive separation so necessary between government and news organizations.

An Adm. Turner may use journalists discreetly while still respecting their rights and responsibilities, but what about a John Mitchell? A reporter's patriotic duty may be critical when dealing with an international intelligence problem, but what if that assistance, just by coincidence, helps an incumbent president stay in office?

The issue separating the protesting editors and Adm. Turner is fine enough to be practically invisible to non-journalists including, apparently, Adm. Turner. But it can mean a great deal to reporters or cameramen. The issue is not whether journalists can freely pursue stories even while working for the CIA, or whether they will be suspected as spies by host nations (they invariably are), but whether by doing so for whatever reason destroys professional integrity which, like virginity, can't be reinstated.

While Adm. Turner took care not to question the patriotism of journalists who would decline a CIA invitation, he nevertheless seemed a bit naive in his professed ignorance of compromises that make newsmen decidedly uneasy.

"I am sorry," he said, "but I don't understand the connection between serving your country and being free (journalists). You can do both."

The point is, that barring overwhelming evidence of immediate national danger, journalists in free societies place an extraordinary value on their arms-length relationship with government. That relationship is fundamental in a democratic society and is the reason why a free press, and not other equally honorable professions, is included in the First Amendment.

If the issue were simply one of "serving your country" there would be, and should be, no differences between the admiral and the editors. In peacetime, however, the differences reflect a debatable matter of constitutional priorities, undertandably a difficult concept for a military-trained CIA director to fully appreciate.